

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

4 November 1983

ETHIOPIA: The Tigrean Insurgency

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Summary

The Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has taken advantage of Addis Ababa's preoccupation with the rebellion in neighboring Eritrea Province to expand its military operations significantly since 1980. It now operates in large portions of the Tigrean countryside and in Tigrean-inhabited areas of Gonder and Welo Provinces. Despite its gains in the past three years, the TPLF clearly lacks the strength to achieve victory militarily.

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The central government is increasingly concerned over the expanding insurgency and has launched several military campaigns in an effort to dislodge the guerrillas. These attacks have had only limited success and government control of Tigray Province remains restricted to the major towns and highways. With neither side capable of military victory or willing to enter serious negotiations, we expect inconclusive fighting will continue indefinitely.

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This memorandum was requested by Frederick L. Wettering, Director of African Affairs, National Security Council. It was prepared by [redacted] Horn of Africa Branch, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division, [redacted]

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Roots of the Insurgency

The Tigreans, largely Christian peasant farmers, share a common cultural and religious heritage with Ethiopia's dominant Amhara ethnic group. For centuries the Tigrean and Amhara royal houses vied for control of the country and recognition as the legitimate defender of Ethiopian culture and Coptic Christian Orthodoxy. [redacted]

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The collapse of Emperor Haile Selassie's Amhara regime in 1974 weakened central government control of the countryside, prompting a renewal of Tigrean nationalism that had been dormant since the 1940s. This rebirth culminated in the formation of the TPLF in March 1975. The Tigrean front grew slowly at first, primarily because of competition within the province from other groups on the left and right. It gradually absorbed the smaller Tigrean resistance forces and defeated rival non-Tigrean guerrillas. [redacted]

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The TPLF increased significantly in size and strength following its alliance in 1978 with the Marxist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the major Eritrean guerrilla group. The agreement gives the TPLF access to arms and training. In addition, the TPLF gained valuable experience in more conventional fighting by participating in joint operations with EPLF units in Eritrea. We estimate that the TPLF now has approximately 15,000 armed regulars and several thousand additional poorly armed "militia" troops. [redacted]

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Ideology and Support

The TPLF leadership was originally dominated by Marxist nationalists from the urban areas; we believe they still play a key role in the organization, although more conservative, less doctrinaire figures have reportedly assumed leadership positions in recent years. This shift is probably a reflection of the increasing numbers of conservative Christians who have joined the TPLF. In an effort to broaden the appeal to these elements, we believe the TPLF leadership has downplayed ideology, stressing instead the historical appeal of Tigrean nationalism and the threat posed to the traditional Tigrean social structure by Addis Ababa's internal socialist policies. [redacted]

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The TPLF's goals have never been clear. According to a Tigrean spokesman, the Front would like to see the government of Ethiopia established as a civilian-led federation, providing for the full and equal participation of the various nationalities in the country. Failing this, he stated that the TPLF would like to acquire either a strong measure of autonomy or full independence for the province. We believe, however, that the Tigrean leadership has the basic long-term goal of supplanting Amhara domination with Tigrean hegemony. [redacted]

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The TPLF leadership apparently recognizes that the movement is unable to achieve its goals alone. [redacted] the Tigreans have been attempting to form an alliance of Ethiopian dissident groups--such as the Eritreans and Somalis--to apply military pressure on the Mengistu regime along a broad front. We believe this proposal is unrealistic and holds little prospect for success. Unlike the TPLF, the other key insurgent groups in Ethiopia are committed to independence from the central government. [redacted]

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Since the late 1970's the Tigrean People's Liberation Front has sought economic and military assistance from several Arab states--especially Saudi Arabia--and the West. The movement's Marxist reputation and predominantly Christian membership have effectively deterred Arab support, however, and there has been little response from Western nations unwilling to jeopardize relations with Addis Ababa. As a result, the TPLF has been forced to rely on arms captured from the Ethiopians or those provided by such sources as Sudan and the larger, more self-sufficient EPLF, which has a large stock of captured equipment and the capability both to produce some light armaments and repair damaged weapons and vehicles. [redacted]

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The close ties between the leadership of the TPLF and the EPLF are based on ideological compatibility and, to some extent, a common Coptic Christian heritage. In addition to providing arms, the EPLF trains Tigrean recruits at facilities in Eritrea and supports the TPLF in its conflict with their mutual antagonist, the Eritrean Liberation Front, another dissident faction. In return, the Tigreans fight alongside EPLF forces in Eritrea and support their effort by harassing government supply lines and garrisons in Tigray Province. [redacted]

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Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Operations

The TPLF insurgents have successfully used classic guerrilla tactics in their campaign against the central government. They have ambushed convoys of regular Army forces, raided isolated garrisons, taken foreigners hostage, and attacked government facilities in large towns to gain publicity or to capture supplies. In addition, they have aggressively attacked the government's poorly armed and ill-trained militia, severely undermining its morale. [redacted]

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Despite the TPLF's impressive growth in numbers in recent years, its military capabilities remain limited. The guerrillas are lightly armed--unlike the EPLF, they have little artillery and no armor to oppose Mengistu's regular forces--and suffer from a lack of vehicles. Without large amounts of outside assistance or a significant expansion of activity from other dissident groups--which we consider unlikely--the TPLF's

ability to pose a serious military threat to the stability of the regime will remain limited. [redacted]

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The government, nevertheless, is increasingly concerned about the TPLF's aggressiveness. The guerrillas not only are challenging Addis Ababa's control of Tigray Province and threatening the supply routes to Eritrea Province, but also expanding their operations to lightly defended areas of adjoining provinces. These attacks, at times in cooperation with other dissident groups, highlight Addis Ababa's vulnerability. To counter this, the government has been forced to divert troops to defensive roles or convoy escort duty and to rely on air transport to move supplies to the north. There are now some 20,000 government soldiers with Soviet advisers in Tigray and nearby provinces. Despite several large military campaigns, the government has failed to subdue the guerrillas, largely because it has been unable to engage them in fixed battles or effectively apply its superior numbers, firepower, and mobility in the inaccessible terrain of the interior. [redacted]

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Mengistu is facing war-weariness in the urban areas and a growing morale problem among northern military units, but continues to maintain a hard-line policy toward the Tigreans. He reportedly has refused to hold any talks to explore the possibility of a political accommodation. The Ethiopian leadership recognizes that any major concessions made to the Tigreans will become a model for Ethiopia's many other dissident groups.

[redacted]

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Outlook

We believe the military confrontation is likely to continue indefinitely, with little or no prospect for a major breakthrough by either side. The TPLF almost certainly will expand its strength and continue to resist Addis Ababa's attempts to control the province. The Tigrean insurgents--considerably lagging behind the Eritrean movement in military clout--are incapable of conducting sustained conventional operations or holding territory against large-scale government campaigns. Until it achieves these capabilities, the TPLF will remain unable to meet its military and political goals. [redacted]

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For its part, the central government lacks the ability to defeat the insurgency or to prevent its expansion. Moreover, Mengistu fails to understand the deep cultural and historic roots of the Tigrean rebellion, and his commitment to a strong centralized regime in Addis Ababa appears to rule out any political solution. Despite his problems with Tigray, Mengistu is as yet under no serious pressure from within the regime to end his efforts to achieve a military victory. He and his supporters may view the Tigrean rebellion--mistakenly--as an off-shoot of the Eritrean conflict which will evaporate once Eritrea is pacified. Although Mengistu

almost certainly will continue to seek a military solution against both movements, we consider his prospects for success to be virtually nonexistent. [redacted]

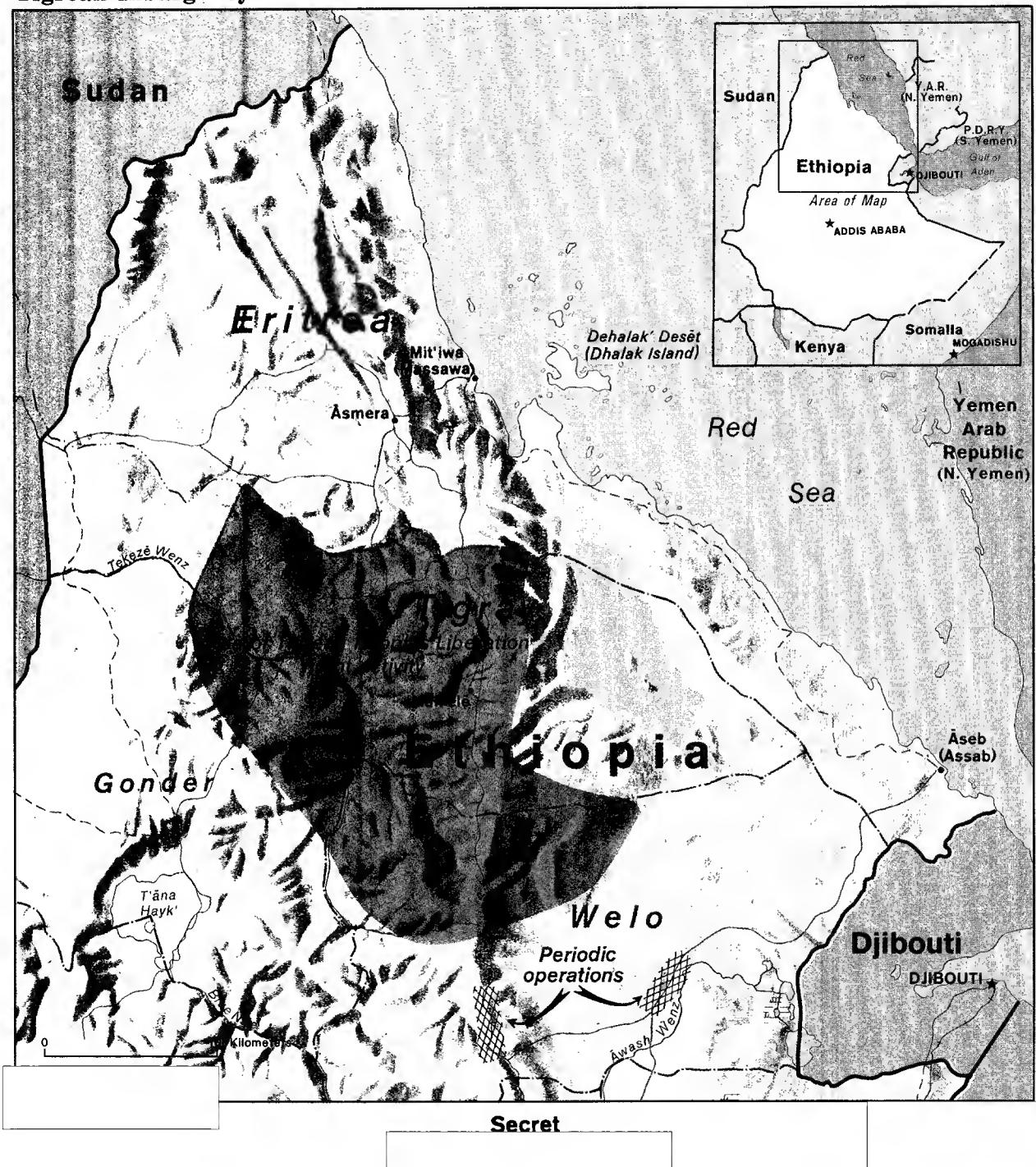
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Over the longer term, a continuing military stalemate in the north would exacerbate morale problems within the military and popular discontent with the war. We believe Mengistu's hold on power and support within the military leadership remains firm, however, and barring his assassination, he will be able to prosecute his current policies indefinitely. [redacted]

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